

Impact of abolition of tuition, project fees

By Dr ARNOLD KUKARI

Introduction

THE ministerial directive to abolish project fees, promulgated mainly through the print media, is consistent with the national government's free education policy.

The main objective of this policy is to ensure the rights of all Papua New Guinean children to education by eliminating access and participation barriers such as school fees.

The abolition of tuition fees in 2012 and the project fees this year is to mitigate the school fees barrier.

This intervention has resulted in an increase in student enrolment, particularly the enrolment of girls.

However, abolition of tuition and project fees only is not enough to retain children and, at the same time, provide them with a quality education.

It requires critical resource inputs such as infrastructure, qualified teachers, teaching and learning resources, boarding school facilities, and operational funds as well.

These enablers are closely linked and therefore should be concurrently addressed to ensure meaningful access and participation by all children, regardless of their circumstances.

Children's right to education

Children's right to education is manifested in a number of significant global human rights frameworks in which Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a signatory.

These include the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These conventions emphasise the right of all children to a free and compulsory education of good quality.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child for example states that: "State parties recognise the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall in particular (a) make primary education compulsory and available free for all".

This right was further encapsulated in the Education for All Goals in 1990, in which one of its goals is for basic education to be universally provided by 2015.

These goals were further enhanced by the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), in which goal number two is for basic education to be provided to all children by 2015.

Country-specific child rights frameworks and related strategies have been developed and are being implemented to enable access to basic education for all school age children.

These include the Lukautim Pikinini Act, the Child Protection Policy, Inclusive Education Policy, and since 2012 the implementation of Tuition Fee Free Education Policy (TFEP).

Although these efforts have contributed towards ameliorating some significant barriers to access and participation, and safeguarding and promoting children's rights to education, thousands of school age children in PNG are yet to have access to education and drop out of school before completing a full cycle of education.

Impact of tuition and project fees abolition

The implementation of TFEP has contributed not only to a massive increase in student enrolment; it has contributed towards improving the educational opportunities for girls, who are affected most by the school fees barrier.

The 2012 and 2013 primary school student enrolment data shows that student enrolment increased from about 771,727 in 2012 to about 942,998 in 2013, an increase of 22.2 per cent.

The female enrolment increased by 41.2 per cent, whereas boys enrolment increased by 32.3 per cent.

The government obviously would like to continue this trend and would want to see all school age children attend school and complete at least Grade 8. To do so, it should consider investing substantially in school resources in order to sustain the gains made and further improve the provision of education.

Moreover, the implementation of the TFEP has had a major impact on the ability of schools to adequately cater to the learning needs of children.

Most schools have a serious shortage of well-resourced classrooms, teachers' houses, teaching and learning resources, qualified teachers, and water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities to support quality teaching and learning, let alone the massive numbers of children that they are expected to enrol as a result of tuition and project fees abolition.

The Government has either not paid much attention to the capacity of schools to absorb additional children or lacked proper evidence-based input to ensure that children are not only enrolled in school but



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must have adequate space to learn.

The positive gains in student enrolment and the plans to have all school age children complete at least Grade 12 could be undermined if absorptive and administrative capacity gaps of schools are not immediately addressed.

Although their interventions may have been inconsistent with government policy and fall short of expected transparency and accountability standards, provinces and districts have proactively tried to address these gaps using measures such as the imposition of project fees.

However, with the abolition of fees, these gaps will not be addressed and, as a result, could lead to the creation of additional participation barriers for children.

Resource inputs challenges and policy interventions

The operational and resourcing challenges of schools induced by the increase in student enrolment as a result of the abolition of tuition fees have been grossly underestimated by the Government.

TFEP funds are inadequate to meet the costs of managing schools and providing essential resource inputs to support quality teaching and learning.

A number of strategies could be implemented to expand education coverage at the school level.

Two of these strategies are discussed here. First, a proper school infrastructure survey should be carried out to collect baseline data on school resource needs, including infrastructure.

This data should be analysed and used to develop National and Provincial School Resources Plans.

This could be a standalone plan or they could be incorporated with the national and provincial plans, which are mandated by both the Education Act and the Provincial Education Act.

This plan will provide the platform for budgeting, providing infrastructure, and monitoring progress at the school level to ensure that required resources are actually delivered on the ground.

School boards will use this plan to seek funding help or impose levies to fund projects captured in the plan. Funding of the plan could come from the provincial, district, and Local Level Government Service Improvement Funds or from partnerships between the national government and the development partners.

Some development partners are already providing infrastructure to schools.

Their efforts could be brought under one national programme so that these are better coordinated, resourced, and monitored to ensure the sustainability of improvements that are made at the school level.

In addition, a proportion of the income generated for the extractive projects such as the Liquefied Natural Gas Project could be provided to boost the implementation of the plan.

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Second, ownership of schools could be devolved to the local communities and with relevant policies and laws to empower them to take ownership of the schools.

Under this concept, communities will have powers to govern and manage their schools, plan for the resource needs of schools, mobilise funds to expend on required resources, and account for the achievement of education outcomes.

School boards can identify projects, develop proposals, and seek help from the Government, aid donors and other development partners to fund these projects.

In this way, schools and communities become more self-reliant, have ownership of schools, and take pride in managing and caring for them. This strategy will minimise dependence by communities on the Government to manage and fund their schools. Although this concept is embedded with the tenets of decentralisation, it has not been examined in some detail and utilised to create a sense of ownership and responsibility by communities over educational institutions.

The cycle of dependence on the Government to deliver education services can be broken by empowering communities to manage their own schools in partnership with governments at the national and the sub-national levels, and with other stakeholders.

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